

On one of my first nights visiting Brooklyn, my brother took me to a little bar in Red Hook called Sunny's—it was here that I discovered the spontaneous, joyful way live music in this borough could work. After sitting in the front room sipping on whiskey for an hour or so, a fiddler, a guitarist and a percussionist ambled into the center of the bar and began playing a set of classic folk, jazz, and blues standards that absolutely blew my California college kid mind. Then, they passed a hat. There was no cover, though it was one of the finest shows I'd ever seen; the music was free, communal. After playing, Smokey Hormel and Charlie Burnham sat down at the bar and drank with us. This night changed my life forever; I went back to Los Angeles, metaphorically and literally packed my things, and moved to Brooklyn a couple months later. It was the tail end of the Fleet Foxes and Bon Iver

folk revival, so there was plenty of folk to be found even in LA, but popular culture's interest in genre is always fickle. In New York, the ghosts of the Village still lingered—they had just migrated to Brooklyn.

A couple blocks from Sunny's—okay, about a mile down the waterfront—is another, larger hub for folk music in Brooklyn. This year marks the tenth anniversary of the Jalopy Theatre & School of Music, a school and venue that Lynette Wiley and her husband Geoff left Chicago to found in 2006.

"We were looking to create a folk music and traditional music venue in Brooklyn where artists could play and teach," Wiley said. "We wanted people to be able to come and learn about different types of music, study them, enjoy them in concert, and have a community around artists who are interested in looking back for their inspiration."

— ADVERTISEMENT —



Aside from a steady thrum of concerts and shows, Jalopy offers classes for aspiring students, a subtle and clever way to pay musicians for being teachers, as well as invest in a new community of talent. It's a rare and somewhat unique combination, one that fosters a back and forth between fans, amateurs, and local virtuosos. Teaching music helps break down the fourth wall—the divide between performer and audience—and recreates the sense of community that spurred the folk movement of the 60s, the spirit that led to gatherings like Woodstock and the Newport Folk Festival.



It's unsurprising, then, that Jalopy was also the birthplace of the Brooklyn Folk Festival, an event spearheaded by Wiley and Eli Smith that's not far behind Jalopy in age; 2016 is the festival's eighth iteration, and it **takes place this Friday, Saturday and Sunday** and the full lineup and schedule is available **here**.

Smith and Wiley met through Jalopy, where Smith was one of the venue's banjo teachers. Together they dreamed up a festival that emphasized traditional music from the local community and all over the world; a space that was based on experience, not celebrity.

"I tried to make a folk festival that was an authentic folk festival that people could experience," Smith said, of his booking choices. "It's a music-based festival. I don't book based on celebrity, I don't book based on hype. We don't have headliners really, we don't have any particularly famous musicians. It's really about the music."

In initial years, the festival was composed mostly of local performers and took place at the Jalopy, but it quickly outgrew those bounds.

"It was pretty local the first two years, most of the artists were from Brooklyn, New York City, maybe New Jersey," Wiley said. "But just as Jalopy has reached out, and has musicians coming from all over the country and sometimes all over the world, the folk festival has done the same thing. We've expanded the reach of the artists we're bringing into play."

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The festival grew so rapidly that demand exceeded first Jalopy, and then the larger Gowanus venue The Bell House. Back in 2014, when the festival was still being held at The Bell House, I attended and **had a few critiques**; I felt there were a number of the young folk songwriters I knew in the borough who should've been involved, but had been overlooked; it pained me to see eager young fans turned away at the door because the show was sold out; I wanted to see more local, younger performers; and all of this born out of my own grappling with what constitutes folk music. Because, really, what the fuck is folk music in 2016? Is it a faithful rendition of past traditions, or an attempt to create some of our own? Should we try to study and imitate the past just as it was, or incorporate technology and modern sounds? These are the question that have plagued me for the greater part of the time I've spent writing about music, and the chance to discuss folk and country musical tradition is a driving force that propels me forward at all times.

Speaking with Smith about his choices, I got a much better sense of his definition and what he values within the tradition.

"I've been a fan of traditional American and world music since I was a kid really," Smith said. "It's called by different names; you can say folk music, although that's a very confusing term, and people often disagree on what folk music is. You can call it traditional music or vernacular music, or some people use the term roots music. I think folk music is really the historically recognized grassroots music of the working class. Mostly the rural working class—but can be urban as well—and that has included in the United States blues, rural African American music like gospel and spirituals, or jug band music is always fun, blues music, as well as string band music, banjo and fiddle stuff and ballads, Cajun music, and all types of different music from the United States."



For Smith, this means doing his research, and selecting musicians and bands who are devotedly rendering music with an historical impetus; he actively avoids booking singer-songwriters and those whose music isn't built with the folk tradition as a



cornerstone. But, by no means is the American folk tradition the only one that he is concerned with.

"I also wanted to feature some music from some of the besieged, war-torn parts of the world," he said. "I want to show people that Syria isn't just a wasted landscape, or a news item, but it's actually an amazing nation with a beautiful culture. So we have some Syrian music at the festival this year. Plus some Afro-Colombian music, music from Ethiopia, and from Mexico—we try to feature traditional music from many different parts of the world. That also brings it back to New York, because we have populations from all over the world that are New Yorkers, that live in New York. So we have this incredible wealth of talent to draw on here in Brooklyn and some of the other boroughs."

Wiley's definition of folk music echoes Smith's in a lot of ways, but she also emphasizes the way traditions influence one another, and how the collaborative element of this kind of music is a crucial part of the tradition.

"What folk music *is* can always be argued—and has been, around Jalopy and late night at the tavern next door for ten years," she said. "People are playing their interpretation of something they have learned from previous music. It's music that's collaborative. There are people who are playing and performing their own music, but where they get their information is from previous musicians playing traditional blues and folk music. There are also a lot of bands are playing very academic looks at their culture's previous music, and that's something that I think is really amazing. It's easier to find historical music than it ever has been, and to study it, and find out what you like about it, and then to present it in your way. Or, to present it exactly as it was presented before. I don't think it's about a genre of music. We've always had music since we've been human, and that history is not broken. Someone looking to play playing traditional Irish music that has morphed into American string band music, and then they take it in a more bluegrass direction? That trajectory is still folk music to me."

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Whatever definition Wiley and Smith are employing, it seems to be working. Last year, the festival grew so large it had to be held at St. Ann & The Holy Trinity, the beautiful Gothic cathedral in Brooklyn Heights. The festival will take place there again this year, and welcomes back another 2015 fixture, [Michael Hurley](#). Hurley is a Pennsylvania native who accumulated a devoted cult following in the 60s, 70s, and beyond, though he never quite reached mainstream popularity. He'll play a Friday night slot this

weekend, and said over the phone from Oregon that he's eager to return to the festival, partially because of the way New York makes him feel, and partially because of St. Ann's itself.



"I like being in Brooklyn. I think it's a lovely old church and I enjoy looking at how it's built," Hurley said of his decision to return to the festival for a second year. "I have a tour going for the Northeast, and that was the first offer, so it was the beginning of my tour plan. As for the festival, I enjoy festivals, particularly music festivals. So, it's a lot of fun."

As someone who lived through the initial phase of folk music's popularity in America, and has been steadily releasing new music all the while, Hurley said that, personally, he tends to favor innovation over traditional recreations.



"The traditionalists, they're just the traditionalists," he said. "The contemporary artists are more inventive, and so I tend to like the more inventive stuff; like people today who are influenced by everything that's out there, everything that you get to hear walking down the street or going to visit people, on the radio and all that. I like that better than people who are the traditionalists. I'm like 'Well why should I listen to this instead of the original?' What amuses me is stuff that sounds new, that I haven't heard before. Something that's very soulful, that touches me."

Still, it's not like tradition has no merit, something Hurley knows very well. He's not the only one. The festival always incorporates plenty of other activities aside from musical performances—the infamous banjo toss in the Gowanus Canal (with a new banjo as the prize), musical workshops, dancing, film screenings etc. One special guest this year is 83-year-old **Mattie Jones**, a Civil Rights activist from Louisville, Kentucky who advocated for victims of racist policies and practices as the Former Chair and Director of the Kentucky Alliance Against Racial & Political Repression. Jones protested for Civil Rights and marched with Martin Luther King Jr. She will be traveling up to Brooklyn from Kentucky for the festival to sing and teach the protest songs that her cohort used to stay motivated in their activism.



"I grew up in a time where racism was at its peak," Jones said via phone from Louisville. "But it was the movement from down south with Dr. King and the incident of Rosa Parks which opened my eyes real wide to racism. Because I used to walk past two or three white schools just to get to my school and never thought anything about it. I'd get on the bus and never thought anything about going to the back. This is when it hit my consciousness 'Hey, I don't want to raise my children in this kind of situation.' So I became a part of an organization they called the Black Workers Coalition. Working in that coalition I learned how to file charges of discrimination against employers and factories. I began to attend the movements and the rallies and take part in the marches that were beginning to occur here in Louisville, Kentucky."

To keep themselves motivated during these rallies and marches, the activists would adapt songs from church to sing while they protested. As a soloist in her church choir, Jones used her musical knowledge to help adapt songs that suited the needs of the protestors.

"When we begin to march, these songs that we used to cheer us on if you will, were songs that we had sung in the African American Baptist church," Jones said. "Only difference is, they added different phrases to it. Like 'Before I'll be a slave I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord, and be free.' I would say it was the same tune, but only different words. So in the marches, the inspiration I got to revive me when I begin to feel a little tired was for us to begin to sing. Someone would start a song, or maybe I was marching and I would start a song to help give us that pep to keep on marching. And that was my beginning of singing freedom songs [and] taking part in the marches."

Smith will be interviewing Jones about her experience on Sunday, and then she will lead the audience in several of these historic songs, in an attempt to pass on the music that was so integral to the Civil Rights movement of the 60s, and which can continue to play a role in current struggles.



"I'm so grateful to those young folks, [Black Lives Matter]," she said. "To see this rise up, to see these young folks say racism can't come back in here and show its ugly face—we've got to do something. And they did something! I applaud those young folks, and I tell them to keep on keeping on."

In her mind, these songs are more than just music; they help reiterate a larger message that is contained in the act of protesting. Jones thinks folk songs are emblematic of struggle, whether that is coming from the African American community or any other marginalized people communicating resistance to an oppressive force.

"I want to travel down memory lane with the participants and I want to let them know at the festival what an inspiration these songs were to us," Jones said. "These songs carry a message to the oppressor. I see the songs of the Civil Rights movement as

totally entwined together with folk music at large. As they sing about their struggles, as the folksingers begin to sing, you see very little difference in their struggle and our struggle. There's no difference. All of these songs are created around a struggle."

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The assertion that folk music is music that sprang from struggle is a sturdier definition for the form than genre, sound, or historical period. It gives us the language to describe the ethos that inhabits this music, a tool to examine the heart and soul of the sound and movement without becoming encumbered by aesthetics. And more to the point, it speaks to the international and multicultural spirit hovering in the wings—or even front and center—in the pageantry of any American renditions of folk.

One international artist who will be performing at the festival this year is Julia Patinella, a multilingual flamenco singer who also performs traditional Sicilian and Latin American repertoires. As a former social worker who spent a good chunk of her time helping immigrant women pursue their own artistic dreams, Patinella eventually took the leap to pursue her own. Patinella studied as a flamenco singer in Seville and now uses her music as a form of social and political resistance.

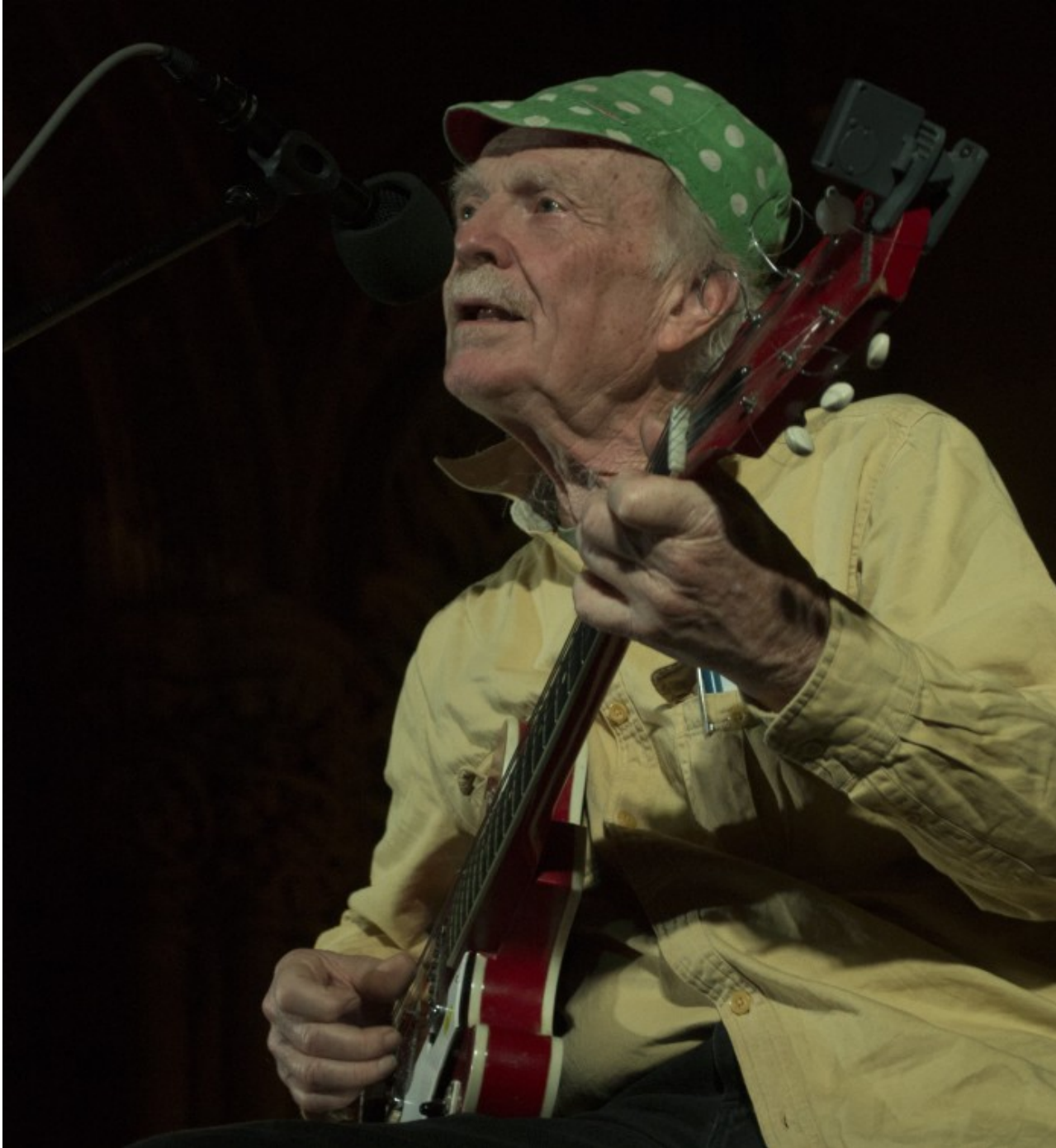
"There's a verse in flamenco that says 'I don't sing because I have a good voice, I sing to take away the pain,'" Patinella said. "That's a lot how I think about my singing. It's really important for me to kind of set the context. Music is my way of resisting or participating in some sort of important humanitarian message. Every stage that I'm performing on I dedicate my performance to immigrants and refugees before I start. Really, the majority of the songs that I sing are themed about that. There are some traditional Latin American or flamenco kind of structures in music where you can really play sort of the same rhythm and melody and you can put in your own words. Most of mine are political if you can say that, but humanitarian."

Interestingly enough, Patinella also described how the flamenco tradition isn't considered to be "folk" music in Spain, because of how many other influences it includes—influences from Arabic music and from the Balkans and India.

"In flamenco there is such a culture of purity," she said. "They're always talking about how pure flamenco is different from folk and it's a very political thing. They feel that gypsies can do it and white people can't. It's certainly become more inclusive—I studied in a flamenco school for years so it's definitely becoming more accessible. The reason they differentiate it from folk is

because folk is really rooted in the kind of classical Spanish influence, and it's kind of understood that flamenco does have influence from that classical Spanish music."

Noting the way folk music is tussled over even in other countries helps to further highlight the relative unimportance of the word itself, and bring into focus what this music stands for: any bill that brings Michael Hurley, Mattie Jones, and Julia Patinella together is investing in the historical and humanitarian implications of a music that doesn't mind getting messy. It goes back to the muddled trajectories that Wiley brought up in her definition of the word, the collaboration and the interpretation become much more central than the genre or sonics.





This familial aspect is something else that Hurley noted in his personal interpretation of folk. The very inventiveness he favors in newer forms of music is part of what obscures the traditional way folk used to function.

"Folk music is homemade," Hurley said. "People made their own instruments even, and they carried the music without recordings. It was carried in people's memories, and passed on that way. So if you were Scandinavian you had Scandinavian music passed on in your community, your relatives. If you're Irish, Black, African, Asian—there's a history of music tradition coming through you, what your parents were doing and so on. Nowadays, it's kind of colored over and obscured by the media. We've got music coming out from hundreds of sources. The folk music now is not so much folk music, it's not centrally focused on folk music anymore."

Wiley echoes Hurley's emphasis on family influence, and the way relationships or trying it yourself at home is imbued into the genre's DNA.

"What I'd like to say about our approach to folk music at Jalopy, is that this music was learned at your grandfather's knee around a campfire for generations," she said. "You play it with your family on holidays. You weren't going to an outside school and learning to play scales, and that's how you developed your skills. Most of this music was taught familial, in a familial situation. I think that's the other thing that's great about this, and about folk music, and about the way most of the people here have come to it. You've definitely got people that have been classically trained on their instruments and they have come to this music. But you've got a lot of people who are self-taught and who study the artists that they were interested in and then are presenting that music. And I think that's a key part of folk music as well."

Hurley said he doesn't necessarily consider himself in the historical sense, either. But, it is worth noting that his parents' interest in jazz is part of what fueled the "jazz-hyped blues and country and western music" he now uses to identify his sound.

"I am not making folk music as I have just described," he said. "I'm just somebody who came up in my time and just took influences from sources that were around as I was growing up. It wasn't folk music. Some of it was, you know, but, it's just a lot of jazz, pop, rock and roll, my parents partied and sang and they were singing some folk songs. They were also singing jazz, or whatever. I still like jazz a lot."

So whether it's for the jazz-spiked blues of Michael Hurley, the flamenco singing of Julia Patinella, the protest songs of Mattie Jones, or any number of other draws on the jam-packed bill slated for this weekend, the Brooklyn Folk Festival is well worth the miniscule \$85 for a three-day ticket, or \$35 fee for a daily pass. As Smith notes, the financial logistics of the festival stray just as far from mainstream practices as their booking philosophy does.

"The tickets are very affordable, we try to keep it really low," he said. "Ticketmaster and all these bastards that control the ticketing systems and are charging \$100 to go to a concert or a festival—it'll probably cost you \$150 a day to go to a music festival! That's disgusting. We don't do that."

Instead, the festival remains focused on creating a space for music to build relationship, mounting a resistance against close-minded oppression, giving voice to struggle and celebrating the bonds of family and community. This is the same spirit that I encountered five years ago at Sunny's, that drew me to New York, and that continues to fuel my interest and investment in the folk and country music traditions. These forms of music aren't antithetical to this city at all, they're nestled deep in the heart of it. New York is a city that has long functioned as a home for people with roots all over the world, and folk music is another way of honoring personal history while living in the current moment, geographically and spiritually speaking.

"We're trying to create community, not just at the festival once a year, but at the Jalopy throughout the year," Smith said.

"We're trying to have a place where people can relate to each other on a very relaxed human level. Things have gotten so crazy in our contemporary New York moment that it can be hard to even speak to someone. So we're trying to make a place for that. That's one of the great parts about folk music—it's for the folks."



For more information on the Brooklyn Folk Festival, including how to purchase tickets, visit [brooklynfolkfest.com](http://brooklynfolkfest.com)

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